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ABSTRACT

The effects of the mass media on the political and social attitudes of young people are considered in this review of research. The author suggests that these effects cannot be adequately assessed without considering the entire societal context. A long-term study (1964, 1970, 1974, and 1980) in West Germany has evaluated the use and assessment of mass media by both German youths and adults. Findings show that most politically interested youths and adults used television significantly less in 1980 than in 1974. Politically interested youngsters with advanced secondary schooling used radio as a source of information significantly more in 1980 than in former years. The use of newspapers remained stable. Research in the United States reveals that for children aged 5-11, viewing television news leads to a slightly better knowledge about political and public events and persons. A correlation exists between heavy viewers and a lower level of education. German research suggests that heavy viewers have a higher rate of anxiety than light viewers and that anxiety is reinforced by heavy viewing. The lessons learned from the influences and quality of television are applicable to the educational problems brought on by the communication/information revolution. Less educated youngsters are more likely to be manipulated victims of anonymous social and political opinion agents. Society must encourage all forms of nontraditional independent learning and adapt modern communications technology to those forms. (KC)

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Effects of New Electronic Technologies on Opinion Formation and Attitudes of Young People

by Karlheinz Rebel

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I. The Present Societal Context

The topic "Young People Today" is still - or even increasingly - an evergreen, in serious studies as well as in the mass media or as the subject of anxious or angry "after-dinner conversations" between adults. The data from empirical studies are numerous, their analysis is contradictory, and - in so far as they come from different research projects - mostly incompatible. And above all, the angle from which the data is viewed, the perspective, influences the analysis and interpretation considerably. Some authors prefer to talk of various "young generations" according to their key concepts for interpretation, not to speak of the differences and variations among the different age groups. Especially in the fifties and sixties sociologists "dared" to try to give their empirical data concrete verbal form and "coin" images of one single youth generation, such as "the sceptical generation" (Schelsky, 1957), or "Youth as a factor of social change" etc. Today a dominant, unique paradigm is not visible or at least scientists no longer dare to create it. Instead, the picture of our present young generation is diffuse; a plurality of approaches and notions is necessary to cope with the many contradictory aspects and data. And in addition - at least this is my own position - only the approach via a comprehensive perspective allowing and analysis of society as a whole and, instead of isolating youth, considering youth as an integral part of it, promises to give more solid results, which can be more easily generalized.

Only from this approach can the two key concepts be deduced which form the basis for the following analysis:

I. The conflict of generations today,
with its specific, observable phenomena of conflict, misunderstanding, and alienation between youngsters and adults, characteristic for our own time, and as such unique.

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II. The change of value patterns

affecting the behaviour and value orientation of young people and leading to conflicts, "deviant" behaviour, a separate identity of the young.

Following this approach and using these two key concepts the decisive questions are not: What are the characteristics, traits, problems of our young people and why do they behave this or that way?

But: What is the nature of the situation created for young people by our present society (including adults and youngsters, public and private educational and other institutions, the changed societal structures with regard to their political, ideological, economic etc. aspects, in the analysis)?

And: What is the relationship between the phenomena of youth culture today and the various factors mentioned in the first question?

The same methodological problem exists with regard to media. Again, the isolated study of the efficiency or of the effects of media leads us nowhere. Only by creating a comprehensive context of understanding shall we arrive at useful insights. But we shall come to the media in extenso in section II of this paper.

Within the process of societal change - society considered as an entity - one element is especially influential for the value orientation of young people at the present time:

The increase of public socialization at the expense of private, individual socialization. Children and youngsters remain from the kindergarten onwards much longer under the influence of publicly organized, socialized, planned and institutionalized education. These socialization processes are accompanied, reinforced or weakened by mass media influences, again a kind of public, institutionalized socialization at the expense of the private sphere and development, educational aims and content. Individually formed and freely chosen forms of communication and social life have to give way to publicly organized, often contradictory forms. These tendencies and trends make it increasingly difficult for youngsters to find their own

identity, their own value orientation and very often lead to feelings of alienation and anxiety produced by exaggerated expectations of achievement and by isolation.

A majority of youngsters find less satisfaction in work - more of them want to enjoy their lives first and foremost, and fewer consider "life as a challenge" to be their main aim. For a majority of them the future has a rather dull, almost hopeless perspective. With regard to central political attitudes the gap between the generations is getting wider, the minimum social consensus seems to be vanishing. There is a certain indication that material aims are - to a certain extent - giving way to post-material aims.[2]

II. The Importance of Mass Communication for Modern Societies in Terms of Media Usage and Media Assessment

In many studies the influence of modern communication technologies on the formation of political opinions and attitudes of the young has been stressed since television, radio, newspapers etc. play an important role in modern societies.

To give an example: the main results of an empirical survey conducted during the election campaign in Jerusalem, Israel, in May 1977 with a sample of 372 high school students[3], shows the following results:

1. The amount of information coming from the mass media is significantly larger than from personal resources. An exception from this general trend are the parents: they are still more important as sources of political information than the other primary groups and are as important as radio. Television and newspapers, however, are more highly esteemed as rich sources of information than parents.
2. Those who use one mass medium tend to use the other media, too. With regard to personal information sources the survey shows a kind of splitting: either the sources are used within the family (parents, siblings) or outside it (friends, teachers, youth movement leaders).

3. Mass media are important factors in the development of political involvement and in opinion formation. In this respect they surpass the effects of personal information sources.

   The highest correlation was found between the appreciation of the newspaper as an important information source and the intensity of political involvement. The latter correlates to a higher degree with the use of all three mass media than with the use of personal socialization agents. A similar trend can be observed with regard to the ability of forming one's own political opinion.

4. The intensity of political involvement and the formation of political opinion correlate highly with the frequent exposure to TV news and discussion programmes and the measure of interest in such programmes.

5. The variable of age correlates highly with the intensity of political involvement, but not with the ability to form one's political opinion. Younger children get their political information rather from their parents and friends, whereas older children tend to get theirs from newspapers and radio programmes. The tendency to get a good deal of political news from the parents correlates positively with the educational style of the father or mother.

So much from this survey. Generally speaking, modern communication media seem to fulfill the cognitive needs of youngsters to get well-balanced information. This also includes the presentation of different views on controversial issues as well as the need for independence from personally filtered information. These needs are satisfied by using more than one medium. TV is especially important for the younger age groups and for children from a lower socio-economic background.

In the Israel survey of 1977, conducted in the hot-house atmosphere of the election campaign, mass media were found to take priority over primary groups as information sources and as the important factors in the development of political involvement and in opinion formation.

But is it legitimate to generalize these results and apply them to more normal situations without the incentive of an election campaign? In many other research projects the role especially of TV in building up political knowledge is seen more or less

differently. As stated in section I of this paper, with reference to youth problems the effects of mass media cannot be adequately assessed without including the entire societal context, within which the various dimensions of political socialization processes, including those effected by mass media, must be studied.

The main result from the Israel survey could also lead to the notion that TV and other mass media would, in view of the denser programme structure and better provision with TV sets, video systems etc., become more and more powerful socialization agents, expecially for young people, displacing all other factors and agents of these processes. Is this notion backed by facts?

In the FRG we fortunately have a long-term study covering the years 1964, 1970, 1974 and 1980, evaluating the use and assessment of mass media by German youngsters and adults.[4]

In 1964 55 % of West Germans lived in households with at least one TV-set; in 1980 97 %. In other words, in terms of technical equipment there is practically a complete provision with TV-sets in West Germany.

But this result is not identical with the actual usage of this equipment. On the contrary, a clear change in usage and assessment is to be found.

Some data may prove this statement: Young people who are politically interested, but have a rather modest school education watch TV in 1980 much less than in 1974. Youngsters with a more ambitious school education are reached slightly better by TV programmes in 1980 than in 1974. Young adults (age-group 20 - 29), as far as they are politically minded and with a good school education, use TV significantly less than in 1974. For the age group 30 - 39 and 40 - 60 the results are similar. Only the age group of 60 and older, as far as they are politically uninterested and only have a modest school education, rely significantly more on TV than in 1974.

With respect to radio programmes, politically interested youngsters with more than elementary and lower secondary schooling (Hauptschule) are reached significantly better as daily listeners in 1980 than in former years. Politically less interested youngsters, independent of their school career, are reached less. For the

other age groups the correlation between political interest and use of radio programmes varies and a general trend cannot be stated.

The use of newspapers is as a whole astonishingly stable. Exception: formally well educated and politically strongly interested youngsters use them less.

The time budgets for the use of these three mass media went up considerably (now 1.5 hours a day). The expansion of leisure time was at the expense of sleeping and eating times. Radio programmes are listened to predominantly outside leisure time. Leisure time, which was previously spent mostly at home was spent to a much greater extent outside it in 1980. In this context we can speak of a real shift in behavioural trends.

Very important is the result that political interest and a better formal education have - as a whole - a kind of reinforcement function for the use of mass media. TV does not participate in the increase of leisure time and is used significantly less as a leisure time medium.

As far as the competition of the mass media among each other is concerned the three mass media reached almost equal portions of the West German population in 1980 (TV 77 %, radio 76 %, newspaper 69 %). Compared with 1974, TV had improved its range in 1980 by 30 %, newspapers by 7 %, radio had remained unchanged.

TV did not take away market shares from the other media, but is used parallel to the others. In 1980, 97 % of the people were reached by at least one of the three media (in 1974 93 %); 42 % (compared to 1974) used all three media daily.

The numbers of addressees of political programmes have increased, more distinctly with radio and newspaper than with TV. The substitution thesis for TV is refuted. If people use the mass media they use them complementarily or at least additively. There is a significant increase of political interest in actual political issues: in 1980 44 % said they were highly interested in such issues, compared to 20 % in 1964. But the political interest has almost no influence on the use of political

programmes, especially in TV, which is as a whole lower (in 1980 69 % for the politically strongly interested, 66 % for the scarcely interested people). Radio and newspapers reach politically only slightly interested people better in 1980 than in 1964. The correlation between political interest and use of TV and radio is similar; it is much higher with the newspaper. As a whole, TV programmes can defeat political non-interest; they are especially used by people who do not have alternative sources. But the central question cannot be finally answered by these data: what is the role of TV for the political socialization of wide sections of the German population, especially of the youngsters?

The answers to the question, "How urgently do you personally need TV?" show that TV has lost ground in the subjective assessment of this medium (burn-out effect): in 1980 52 % of the population stated that they would not miss radio, 60 % the newspaper, only 47 % TV. These results are similar to results in the U.S.A., where the opinion of people about TV is much more critical.

The functions of the mass media are seen to be slightly different in 1980 compared to 1974: TV is still considered to be an important source of information, whereas its other functions are criticized much more. Radio is considered to be more up-to-the-minute and better suited for recovering from daily stress. The main function of newspapers is seen in their local information. These opinions do not correlate with the actual use of these media.

For TV programmes, the range and the amount of viewing time are stagnating. Radio programmes were able to gain parts of the market outside leisure time. In spite of the extension of TV programmes there is no increase in TV-consumption to be observed. The use of TV is strongly dependent on age and educational status. Younger people (below the age of 30) were less reached by the three mass media in 1980 compared to 1974 (exception radio programmes by politically strongly interested people). In 1974, already TV and newspapers reached young people at below average levels; in 1980 this trend has become stronger.

Other leisure time activities in 1980 were higher or at least equal to the time budget for the three mass media. There seems to be an ongoing process of differentation and specialization

among different communication groups. So records, books and periodicals have become more important for youngsters than newspapers. If we use for our interpretation Richard Maisel's theoretical three phase-frame[5]: media for the elite - popular mass media - specialized media for differentiated communication groups, then we could argue that West German society is at the moment in a state of transition from the industrial to the post-industrial phase, based on a high educational standard, relatively high social security and welfare for almost all, freely available time, and sufficient population size. As a consequence the use of the media follows (according to the "Uses and Gratification Approach") a highly differentiated, need-oriented behaviour pattern of the population.
The mass media - as a consequence - lose as a whole because of their high generality and unspecific character. Especially young people with a relatively high educational standard prefer special media for groups with homogenous information needs.

Irrespective of this general trend we have to differentiate not only between actual use and opinions about mass media but also have to consider what people really learn in terms of knowledge acquisition. There is some proof that for many people, especially youngsters, only fragments of news events, isolated from their contexts, are communicated.[6] In other surveys it was found that about two thirds of the news did not reach the viewers' understanding.[7]

From a survey with 703 kindergarten and primary school children (age group 5 - 11) in the U.S.A. in 1973 we know that almost 50 % of the children saw the special children's television news programmes. Sex, age, and family structure are important variables: e.g. boys use these programmes much more than girls. Race and socio-economic status have no influence on TV-viewing. As a whole, viewing TV news leads to a slightly better knowledge about political and public events and persons, to a greater readiness to talk about the news with parents, and friends, and - for about 50 % of the TV-viewers - to a recognized need to get more information.[8] This survey, as well as many others, refutes the old thesis that children do not use TV news. But it is also clear from research that TV news is

often not consciously sought by children but is somehow accepted if placed in the programme between two entertaining productions. There was no positive correlation to be found between using TV news and educational TV and no positive effects on school performance. If parents discuss present political issues there is also an intensified use of TV news by the children. Older children profit in terms of more knowledge, younger children are influenced affectively. But it is to be doubted whether "the new 'parent' is the mass media".[9]

The emotional effects are probably the most important factors in the socialization process: Knowledge conveyed by radio and television is forgotten in the usual way - at first faster, then more slowly. Emotional first impressions generated by these media, however, remain virtually unchanged. There is no forgetting, no alteration to be observed.[10]

American researchers have examined the effects of programmes for the following mostly affective fields: violence, the roles of the sexes, questions pertaining to racial problems and minorities, as well as advertising. In all cases it has been found that although television may influence children, there is nothing to indicate that there has to be such an influence. The only field where it does appear very likely that normal TV will contribute to the socialization of a child, is that of aggressive behaviour induced by watching violence on TV.[11]

III. The Heavy Viewer in the Socialization Process

Among children and youngsters there exists a group which has a certain tendency to develop a heavy viewer attitude, and this the more so the more TV programmes are offered. In certain social groups one of the effects of TV viewing is the building up of a so-called "mainstream effect", i.e. TV seems to support relatively common viewpoints of persons in similar age groups and/or social strata. On the other hand non-heavy viewers, especially among children and youngsters, more often show widely differing viewpoints. There is also a distinct correlation between heavy viewers and a lower level of education.

A second construct in the "cultivation theory" is the so-called "resonance effect": If what one sees on the TV screen corresponds to what one considers to be social reality then there may be a sort of cumulative effect: the cultivating effect of TV is doubled. As a consequence, heavy viewers especially might become victims of the fear of oppression, alienation, and of the approval of violence.

In connection with the "cultivation theory" there are more unsolved than solved methodological problems and sharp controversies.[12] It is not the purpose of this paper to go into the details of this academic battle. But there seems to be some explanatory capacity in this approach which should be used in combination with the research findings reported in sections I and II of this paper.

A German reanalysis of G. Gerbner's cultivation-theory approach showed indeed some methodological deficits. But the theory as such is not refuted by them.[13] Gerbner's research seems to be a step in the right direction.[13] And there are additional findings from a German research project (age group 11 - 15) using a different methodological and theoretical framework which to a certain extent support some of Gerbner's main theses.

- Girls show a higher rate of physical and social anxiety than boys.
- The physical anxiety diminishes after some time, the social anxiety remains stable.
- Heavy viewing is a relatively stable trait.
- Heavy viewers have a higher rate of anxiety than light viewers.
- Higher anxiety leads to heavy viewing, and this again reinforces anxiety.
- Personal faculties and situational factors influence the development of anxiety more than TV. But for the assimilation and reinforcement of anxiety the quantity of TV-viewing plays the central role.

IV. The Development of New Electronic Technologies and Their Possible Effects on the Political Attitudes of Students

The number of communication technologies available to everybody is steadily increasing, the boundaries between them are breaking down. Instead of isolated pieces of hardware systems these new systems, - e.g. video systems - allow multifunctional configurations, not only connecting technological elements within a household, but also widening its potential beyond its boundaries and making, for instance, large central computers accessible to the individual. Besides the old and popular hardware like radio/TV-set, audio-cassette and video-tape recorders and telephone, new electronic developments are conquering the markets, like home computers, video discs, access to data banks through data networks, videotext, satellite and multi-channel cable TV etc. The communication/information revolution is upon us and the question is not, whether it will have effects on all of us and especially on our young people - it quite certainly will - but whether we make it a useful instrument and integrate it in our planning the future or lag behind again and lose the chance of influencing it for socially and individually acceptable aims.

At the moment the situation does not look promising. Whilst within the next 10 - 20 years every child and student may have his own computer, being able to use its language, most of the adults and especially the teachers remain computer illiterates, missing the chances of its inter-active capacities, of its potential for individualized learning, of widening learning to complex everyday problems, and of integrating living, learning and occupational environments. The institutionalized educational systems will lose even more ground than is at present the case and become marginal compared to the individualized home education systems which will undoubtedly develop.

But who will be responsible for the aims, the content, the hidden curriculum behind these systems, who will make the immense quantity of software needed, following which principles? "The modern electronic tools have a way of developing a dynamic power of their own which will affect our thinking on concepts, aims, and methods of education ...". They bring with them "also a

revolution of ideas. The new technologies will give us new understandings of specific subject matter and new understandings of the process of learning itself. They will affect the way people think and learn. Indeed, learning to use computers may change the way they learn everything else."[14]

These new highly developed and sophisticated communication technologies have no equally developed counterpart in terms of educational concepts or at least insights into their effects on youngsters with the exception of non-traditional forms of learning all over the world.

Certain political effects are already foreseeable: The less educated and the more dependent youngsters are, the more they may become manipulated victims of anonymous social and political opinion agents. The irrational elements in our societies may gain power among the uneducated mass of the people. Fear, violence, aggression may increase. The gap between the educationally privileged, mostly independent learners and the underprivileged may become insuperable, with all the political consequences for our societies. The findings in section I - 18 of this paper will not only apply, but will become maximized if these developments continue in an uncontrolled way.

What can be done? My personal answer is to encourage all forms of non-traditional independent learning - as we see them all over the world - thus forcing the traditional educational systems, if their representatives want them to survive, to open to these independent non-traditional forms by using modern communication technologies. The time has passed when it was possible to adapt educational technology to the classical teacher-classroom-learner model. Today, schools have to adapt to the new learning needs of the mass of people; teachers have to change their roles and become facilitators of learning which comprises living, working and learning environments. The communication technologies can make these aims realizable towards some useful humanistic end. But if we leave them to themselves they will tend to become an end in themselves. This would mean the end of human culture. Democracy would have lost the decisive war.

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